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ABSTRACT

Increases in the divorce rate, decreases in women's childbearing, and increases in women's participation in the labor force represent three major trends that have had a great impact on women and on the family as a setting in which to work, raise children, and control resources. Although women's employment is clearly related in part to their increasing recognition of the importance of self-development and some measure of independence, two-thirds of America's employed women have a very clear and present economic need. In addition, increasing numbers of women are recognizing that they will, in all probability, be both homemakers and wage earners. Nevertheless, women's paid employment creates pressure for changes in the internal dynamics and organization of family life. With increasing frequency, men must assume tasks traditionally thought of as women's responsibility, a process that is not without problems for families. To help alleviate these problems, policymakers must develop policies to provide for adequate child care, sufficient wages to permit families to afford child care, stronger safety nets to support families in crisis, and continuing preventive services for families. (MN)

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Women and Family Life

June 29, 1984

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Introduction

Although views of the family are almost infinite in number, the family has commonly been considered and analyzed according to one of four paradigms: The family is the social unit that determines the responsibility for, control of, and expenditure of personal wealth. The family is the primary unit of economic production, providing the haven within which the laborer is cared for and nurtured and the setting for the labor required for these nurturing activities. The family is the social unit which makes the most immediate investment in the long-term future of the society, through investment in the growth and development of children, the next generation of society's workers and citizens. The family is also the most basic political unit, within which family members work out issues of sex roles, dominance, power and attitude.

Changes in women's lives have always been considered particularly threatening to society at large because of the implications of such changes for families and family life. Discussion that has put women particularly on the defensive concerns the impact of women's labor force experience on young children, and on the family as the nurturing environment for

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young children. However, detailed analysis of women and family life provides little evidence that women are abdicating their responsibilities to the coming generation as they assume new responsibilities and roles in the larger society.

In this paper I will briefly review the demographic shifts in the family, discuss the implications of these shifts for women and for the family as a setting in which to work, raise children, and control resources. A second section will include discussion of the interplay between women's paid work, their unpaid work in the home, and the quality of family life. A third section will center on a discussion of families' needs for services. The concluding section will outline policy alternatives to support women in families.

Demographic Trends

The three major trends representing the largest population shifts, and also the trends most discussed in the development of public policies, are increases in the divorce rate, decreases in women's childbearing, and, most dramatically, increases in women's participation in the paid labor force. Not only are changes in women's lives considered cause for concern about family life, but women are often blamed for the fact that such changes are occuring. Demographic changes in divorce, childbearing, and labor force participation have certainly had an impact on the family as a setting for raising children. However, as women, and mothers in particular, have entered the paid labor

force, they have maintained their commitment to their responsibilities.

Divorce: The rate of divorce is higher than ever before. There are now (1980) 22.6 divorces per thousand married women in a given year, compared to 10.3 divorces three decades ago. (1) Escalation in the divorce rate is generally deplored because of its impact on children. Certainly, if divorce and marital disruption only affected adults, it would probably not be considered of such major significance. (2) Of children born between 1941 and 1950, about 11 percent were involved in a period of family disruption due to the divorce of their parents, compared to an estimated of at least 18 percent of children born around 1970 undergoing such disruption. (3)

It is important to note, however, that even for children born as late as the decade 1941-1950, the rate of disruption of family life due to the death of a parent exceeded that resulting from parental divorce. In fact, only quite recently has there been any significant increase in the number of children who undergo family disruption due to the death of a parent or the divorce of parents. But, in 1982, analysis of census data indicates that 8.4 million women were in households with a child under 21 whose father was not in the household. (4)

Divorce affects the economic well-being of both women and children. Women, in general, are disproportionately represented among the poverty-stricken in the United States. Women single

heads of household are among the poorest women in the country. (5) There are many explanations of their economic straits. In most cases of divorce and separation where children are involved, child support becomes the woman's burden primarily. (6) Only 47 percent of the 4 million women due child suport payments in 1981 received the whole amount due. (7) Furthermore, the mean amount due according to court order was $2,050. (8) Even the full amount of most awards is insufficient to cover the major portion of the cost of raising a child.

Women earn roughly 60 percent of men's earnings (9). They are segregated into occupations that generate relatively low incomes. Significant proportions of single women, and of Black women, in particular, earn income and wages under the federal poverty guidelines, even though they are employed full time. Many of them are involuntarily employed part-time. (10) Teen parents, many of them unemployed, suffer from the life-long effects of their often curtailed education. Single parent families are poor, because they cannot generate two incomes; because women earn less than men; and because men contribute relatively little to single parent families.

Divorce affects the kinds of emotional and energy resources available to the family. (11) Employed women with responsibility for young children, even those in relatively supportive dual-earner families, report considerable fatigue. Time budget studies indicate that employed mothers in dual earner families

contribute considerably more work (combined paid and unpaid labor) than their spouses (12), and they sleep less (13). Earning single parent mothers must absorb a still larger work load. (14)

Under the stresses of family dissolution and economic shortfalls, many families have reformed or "recombined" in new ways relatively difficult to count through our current census data. Throughout the 1960's and 1970's there was continuing debate over the number of children living with only one parent and, most frightening to family analysts -- the number of children reported as living with neither parent, a figure first report to be decreasing (15) and then unknown (16). Many families joined together in households including more than the members of one nuclear family. Furthermore, Black families, and families of other ethnic communities, continue to form multi-generational households.

Until recent changes in March, 1983, analysis of census data has been unable to provide a genuine count of the children residing with at least one parent. (17) If neither parent is recorded as the "head of household," the relationship between the child and a biological parent has been inaccesible to research analysts. For example, if a child was living with his or her mother, but the mother and child resided in a household headed by the mother's mother or father, the census recorded a head of household with a daughter and grandchild in the household. That

grandchild was not recorded as living in a household with at least one parent. Thus, in spite of our concern with the family environment of children subject to family disruption of divorce and separation, we have been unable to keep track of the proportion of children living with at least one of their parents.

Childbearing: Women have been planning to have, and indeed having, fewer children, although trends may be changing. In the early 1970's women were planning to have, "on the average, one child less than their counterparts of the late 1950's." (19) Furthermore, a small but growing number of women say that they are planning to have no children at all. As the number of children per woman has decreased, so has the average size of each household. In 1960 households had an average of 1.21 people under 18 years of age, compared to 0.81 in 1979. (20) A growing proportion of women are waiting until their late twenties and thirties to have children, at the same time that a growing proportion of women in their teens are having children.

The decrease in childbearing has been accompanied by a considerable increase in the investment required in order to raise children. Estimates of the financial investment required per child has risen as high as $75,000 (including a college education). (21) Childrearing advice literature and scholarly documents on children's development have also undergone substantial transition. Compared to four or five decades ago, children are seen as requiring more concentrated time and

attention on the part of mothers and as more sensitive to small errors in parental communication. Thus, current child rearing advice literature describes in signficant detail not only issues of cleanliness, nutrition, and discipline, but the approproiate wording for responding to children's questions and playing with them. (22) Mothers and fathers both report self-doubt over their ability to follow through on this advice. (23)

Labor Force Participation: Changes in women's labor force participation have been considered a "subtle revolution" in this society. (24) Overall, women's labor force participation has risen dramatically in the last two decades. While only 35 percent of women were employed in the early 1950's, that proportion of women now employed is now over 50 percent. (25) Furthermore, the increase in women's labor force participation is reflected in the number of dual earner couples in the population. Of all husband-wife couples, roughly half include two partners employed; one quarter have only one partner employed; and the remaining quarter have neither partner employed (husband and wife are retired, in school or unemployed). (26) Dual-earner couples are the largest and fastest growing segment of American married couples, and they are almost a majority.

Not only have women been entering the paid labor force at an accelerated rate, but the rate of paid employment has been growing fastest among mothers of children at home. Thus, in 1980 54 percent of wives with children under eighteen were employed,

compared to 18 percent in 1950. (27) These two changes, in the increasing number of dual earner couples and in the increasing employment of mothers of young children, have led to a dramatic change in the structure of American households. Our American perception of the "typical" or traditional American couple is an employed father, a mother full-time homemaker, and children; yet only 12 percent of American households now fit that description. (28)

American families, particularly families with young children, have changed: there are more single parent households; there are more households with young children and employed mothers; there are more mothers with only one child.

Women's Paid Work and Family Life

Changes in women lives, their increased employment, the fewer number of children they are bearing, and the increasing rate of divorce, certainly all signal changes in the structure of marriages. Women's employment is certainly related in part to women's increasing recognition of the importance of self development and some measure of independence in the result of the death or divorce of the spouse. However, 2/3 of America's employed women have a very clear and present economic need. They are either the sole wage earner in their household, or they are married to spouses earning under $15,000/year. (29) Women, in general, are employed to support their families and homes.

Women, themselves, do not define themselves as only

homemakers or only paid workers. Women who are home for years as full-time homemakers more usually assume that they will be entering the paid labor force at some time in their lives and feel they have a paid occupation. (30) Increasing numbers of women are recognizing that they will, in all probability, be both homemakers and earners. A recent reader survey of the Woman's Day magazine readership indicated that a woman's current employment was not a strong predictor of women's attitudes to public policy issues, even those, such as child care and affirmative action, strongly related to employment opportunities. (31)

Not only are women entering the labor force in greater numbers; some are entering male-dominated occupations such as the professions of law, medicine, and corporate management, and the trained blue collar occupations such as welding, machine work, and construction work. Women continue to face substantial problems in these occupations, including sexual harrassment, limited access to training, and exclusion from informal job-related networks. Furthermore, training and job advancement in male dominated occupations have been structured around certain assumptions about adult lives.

The decade in an individual's life from the 20's up through the young 30's is a time when individuals in most of the male-dominated professions and occupations receive their intensive training and are tested implicitly and explicitly for

their abilities to specialize and advance on the job. This is the time when doctors engage in their 80-hour-per-week internships, when young corporate managers prove their fast-track capabilities, and when the blue collar trades demand participation in apprenticeship programs. This decade of life is a difficult time for single parent women, and for women and men in dual earner couples to engage in an all-out investment in the job. Women and men assuming both job and family responsibilities may need to develop a career track that is a "slow burn to the top" rather than the "fast track." (32)

Granted women's need to be employed, their ability to earn and support a family is hindered by the lingering affects of discrmination by sex in the work place. Women need to earn, not only for themselves, but for their families. At the same time, they are hampered in their ability to earn, by the lower wages paid to women in traditionally women's occupations and paid to employees working less than full-time, most of whom are women, many of them with family responsibilities. Overall, the wage gap remains, even though the education gap between men and women has entirely closed. (33) In fact, women are now at least half of the student population in higher education.

For many women then, paid employment is a financial necessity; indeed, their income may barely cover family needs. However, women's paid employment undoubtedly creates pressure for changes in the internal dynamics and organization of family life,

again a change much analyzed and discussed, and often viewed with suspicion. In fact, as women continue to enter the labor force, there is pressure on men in families to undertake more of the homemaking. Although women are prepared to curtail many of their home based activities such as active socializing (34) when they are both employed and responsible for a family, in fact, most women, whether employed or not, in most families, still undertake amounts of homemaking considerably greater than those assumed by their husbands.

Homemaking responsibilities have been studied in two-parent families in part because such studies illuminate the internal dynamics of family life. In the mid 1960's when the first time-budget studies were undertaken on husbands and wives in dual earner and single earner families, the differences between husband's and wife's workload were considerable. An unemployed wife in a two-parent, two-child household contributed an average of fifty-eight hours a week in household labor. Her husband contributed an average of eleven hours a week in household labor. An employed wife contributed about forty-one hours a week in household labor in addition to her hours on the job. Her husband contributed an average of about thirteen hours a week." (35)

However, continuing studies of housework allocation during the 1970's indicate that the gap between women's and men's time contributed to homemaking activities is beginning to close. (36) Women are beginning to do less as men undertake some tasks

traditionally thought of as "women's work." This process is not without problems for families. We have tended to give little recognition to the complexities of homemaking work, and to the number of tasks that make up housework and child care. One journalistic account indicates that homemaking includes at least thirteen occupations, ranging from chauffeur to cook to housecleaner to seamstress. (37)

Not only are there a number of distinct and complex tasks combined in the task of homemaking, but some of these tasks are more pleasant to perform and rewarding than others. Among the more pleasant tasks are those which can be scheduled relatively flexibly, those which gain the performer significant recognition from others and those that include socializing, particularly with one's own young children and during the part of the day when those children are easiest and most pleasant to be with. This social interaction with children at bed time, bath time, the park or wherever, tends to be among the first activities undertaken by husbands and relinquished by wives. Other more pleasant chores follow. In fact, husbands and wives tend to concur that one of the benefits of changing work patterns in the home is that fathers become more invested in and closer to their young children. (38)

Husbands often feel they are taking on an increasing number of chores traditionally done by women. In this time of change in family life, they may feel that relatively few of their male

colleagues in the workplace, friends, or relatives are doing as much homemaking work. They feel stressed as they find themselves less able to take work home or work overtime. And their work in the home seems relatively unappreciated. In most families men perform significantly less than half of the homemaking chores. Furthermore, although wives recognize that they are receiving assistance from their husbands, they also feel the effects of giving up the more pleasant chores while maintaining a heavy load of the less pleasant work of homemaking: the quality of their work in the home is deteriorating faster than the time saved helps them.

The workload can remain debilitatingly high in these families where there is not even a minimal transfer of homemaking work from husband to wife and in single-parent families. Wives receiving little support from husbands and single parents report increasing fatigue as they sleep less at night in order to find more time to work and some time for themselves. They also report a continuing sense of personal ineffectiveness as they feel less and less compentent at meeting their heavy and numerous responsibilities. (39)

The aggregate statistics and the overall analysis of homemaking work presented above mask significant differences among sub-populations of American families. Women in Black families, among other ethnic American families, have different employment histories and have made different adaptions to the

stresses of combined paid employment and responsibilities in family life. Black women have always been in the paid labor force at relatively high levels and at levels signficantly higher than those of white women. Only in the last few years has the employment gap between white and Black women closed. (40)

Black fathers in dual earner families contribute significantly to homemaking. Black children, particularly adolescent children, contribute signficiantly to the labor of the dual earner household. (41) Children's contributions tend to be dropped from aggregate statistics on homemaking work, because, overall, their contributions are small. This has masked the considerable contributions of Black children and of children in single parent families.

Family Service Needs

Child Care: As women, and mothers of young children entered the paid labor force in large numbers, researchers and policy analysts began asking, "If mothers are on the job, who is looking after their children?" The evidence that good quality care in a center is injurious to children is almost nonexistent. Different kinds of care can be good for children if there are sufficient resources to give each child adequate attention from well-prepared adult staffs and a safe, cheerful, stimulating, and well-planned physical environment. However, even though almost half of the mothers of preschoolers are now employed, only 9.1 percent of preschoolers of part-time employed mothers and 14.6

percent of preschoolers with full-time employed mothers, are cared for in day care centers. (42) Many parents still prefer, or find more accessible, care more similar to the care provided in the family home. (43) If children, particularly very young children, cannot be cared for in their own homes, most parents prefer that they be cared for in another family home.

Research on the impact of various kinds of child care on the development of young children is extensive and inconclusive. Few studies indicate any marked effect of different kinds of good care on children's long term healthy growth and development. In fact, reviews of the large body of research on child care and children's well-being indicate that children are much more dramatically affected by the resources available to the mother in making life decisions and the quality of the care provided than by the specific decision around whether or not to be employed and what type of child care will be used. (44)

Parents' ability to select child care is clearly dependent in large part on the cost of different kinds of child care. The largest portion of the costs of child care is the salary cost of the child care worker. Most experts concur that there should be no more than 6-8 pre-schoolers in any one adult's care, and that ratio is much smaller for infants and young toddlers. If child care workers, almost always women, are to receive even minimum wages, the cost of full time care becomes a major expense for low to middle income families.

Cost, however, is not the only issue. The availability of the desired form of care is also critical. Because mothers and fathers remain committed to raising children in homelike environments, there continues to be a crying need for services such as family day care. Family day care as it now exists is largely unregulated. A large majority of the family day care settings are unlicensed and not subject to regulated "quality control." The workers in family day are, like other child care workers, often underpaid and overworked.

Parental attempts to maintain control over the environment of their young children often lead them, even when employed, to undertake much child care on their own. National statistics and small scale studies suggest that as many as a quarter of middle income mothers and fathers in dual earner families with young children operate on a "split shift" or "tandem" approach. (45) That is, they work different hours from each other in an effort to arrange their lives so that a parent can always be available to the children. Overall, 10.6 percent of the children of full-time employed women are in the care of their father during mother's working hours, and 23.1 percent of the children of part-time employed women. (46)

Parents also often prefer to depend on care provided by their own extended families, and, of course, they find it more affordable. Thus, 20.8 percent of the children of full-time employed mothers are cared for by relatives either in the child's

own home or in the relative's home, and for children of part-time employed mothers, that figure is 13.2 percent. (47) Mothers, even those using larger institutions, often try to select services for their children through their personal social network. Thus, a mother might send her child to the day care center where a friend or relative is employed. (48) Family and close friends remain important to parents as child care resources not only because they often cost less, but because they are seen to be more in tune with parental values for raising children. (49)

Child care is not solely an issue for families with very young children. There is a rapidly increasing need for child care for young school-age children who require supervision during hours before and after school when their parents are employed. Only recently has there been a concerted effort to develop model programs for the care of the school-age children, including the young adolescent children, of employed mothers. (50)

Higher Wages: The increasing need for child care combined with the difficulties many parents face in affording child care, highlights one of the many impacts of women's relatively low wages. A significant proportion of employed women are poor, and it is their poverty, rather than the fact of their employment that has the most dramatic impact on family life. They cannot afford many of the resources important for their families. Furthermore, among women, Black women are disproportionately represented among the poor and among the employed poor. Women

heads of household are also disproportionately represented among the poor. (51)

Community Supports: Women are not only paid less on the job, but they have traditionally assumed unpaid and volunteer work serving the extended family, neighborhood and community. They continue to be responsible for a large share of the other unpaid work that supports such organizations as church and school, and also supports much less formal groups such as they neighborhood babysitting pool. The experiences of many volunteer-based organizations support the belief that once women enter paid employment, they drop out of the unpaid, volunteer labor market. And, in fact, this is true to some extent. However, employed women still make a substantial contribution to the volunteer labor force underlying community organizations. (52) There is relatively little research on women's unpaid volunteer work, but a 1973 study indicates that American wives contributed an average of 55 hours/year of volunteer labor. (53)

Women undoubtedly do drop their hours of volunteer work during the high stress time of life that includes employment combined with the care of young children. Under the stress of multiple responsibilities, women are most likely to contribute their volunteer time to those agencies or organizations with the most immediate impact on the well-being of their families and communities: organizations such as their churches, schools, and recreational and social organizations. They are less likely to

devote their time to organizations aimed at a more general good, such as college alumnae groups, political groups, and national voluntary agencies.

Women perform unpaid work in serving their extended families. Families continue to meet many needs of the elderly, elderly relatives, in particular. And it is more likely the women who are undertaking the day-by-day care and support of elderly family members. One study indicates that while husbands and fathers are more likely to take on the work of financial mamangement for elderly family members, women are more likely to undertake the daily errands and helping activities, such as shopping, requiring continuing time and energy. (54)

Furthermore, demographic changes have led to increases in what is needed by elderly family members. expectancy has risen rapidly in this century, at the same time that families are smaller. Elderly parents are likely to have fewer children, and and any one child is more likely to have responsibility for many more years of older family members' lives. This is clearly not all work and responsibility. Many families gain enormously from exchanges and interactions among the generations. But families are called on to provide more, as elderly people are more likely than in preceding generations to succomb to disorders creating long periods of partial disability. Failures on the part of families to meet the needs of the elderly should not be interpreted as a loss of commitment on the part of families, but

as a need for resources and support in undertaking a heavier task.

Women's commitment to family health and well-being is not only evident in their unpaid work in home and community. Many of the occupations that serve families are women-dominated occupations. Our country's teachers, social workers, nurses, home visitors and domestic workers are by-and-large women. In these occupations, paid, but not well-paid, women also contribute to families, and carry on under the stresses of the enormous demands put on families. Women continue to support families through their household labor, their paid labor, and their volunteer labor in the community.

Alternative Policies

In spite of fears that as women invested more in their paid work, they would provide less in their other realms of responsibility. Women continue to care desperately about the continuing well-being of their families. They pour their personal resources of time, energy, and thought into the work connected with their family, children, and other unapid activities. Family policy, rather than punishing families for failure to meet increasing responsibilities and offering only limited aid when family resources are depleted, should be designed to strengthen families, enabling them to best deploy their resources in meeting their many responsibilities.

There is a need for stronger safety nets supporting families

in crisis. Most federal assistance programs for families are designed to help families only after they are in dire need. And these programs, our safety nets, have holes in them. Only in this country and in the Union of South Africa can it be anticipated that some families will undergo financial bankruptcy over family medical bills. (55) Our federal supports for families, AFDC, food stamps, medicare for families with young children, and unemployment support are structured as emergency services offered only after the family has spent or failed to accrue any but the most minimal resources.

There is a need for continuing preventive services for families. Family allowance schemes such as those in Canada and Great Britain, national day care programs such as Sweden's, and national health plans such as Great Britain's (56) certainly have problems and flaws associated with them. They can be expensive to operate. They can further bureaucratize family support systems. But they do deliver an important message to families: The government wants to assist families by strengthening them before they fail, rather than succoring them after they fail.

Many, if not most, of the female-dominated professions also serve families. Yet the work of these jobs is often conceived in such a way that women's long-term effectiveness on the job on behalf of families is blunted. Here is one nurse speaking of her work with teenage mothers. "I feel that I stand beside a rushing river. A young woman is drawn by, struggling in the current and

screaming for help. My job is to jump in the river, drag her to shore and help her get well enough to walk away. No one expects it to be part of my job -- or anyone else's -- to go up the river to see what pushed her in or down the river to see that she stays out." (57)

Women need a more equitable wage structure. We continue to place a heavy burden on families, much of which is financial. Women continue to head an increasing number of families, and they need to be able to support them. Comparable worth programs now beginning in states across the country could be of inestimable value to families dependent on women's wages. We need to create legislation that enforces equal pay for jobs of comparable worth, and, in so doing, allows women to earn a living wage for themselves and their families in their chosen occupations.

Women and their families need access to a variety of options for obtaining assistance with such services as child care before they are in desperate straits. Child care is an example of a family service area in which the creation and support of options is crucial. Furthermore, child care is an area in which the private sector as well as the public sector is active. Employer-provided benefits only assist those employees assisted by private sector benefits plans. However, they can increase the number and kind of options available to parents. Parents differ from each other in their requirements of child care. Employer supported child care is usually interpreted as "on-site child

care." One report (58) outlined the costs and benefits of eight different patterns of employer assistance for child care, ranging from information and referral services for parents to voucher systems to support for community child care alternatives. Most American parents want and need to maintain control over the caring environments for their children. Only by offering them reasonable options from which to select such environments can we support their parenting and strengthen the families in which they parent.

Other kinds of employment-related benefits are critical to women and family life. These include flexible work scheduling, sick or personal days that can be used to care for ill children, and policies such as paternity leave encouraging the support and involvement of fathers in family life. These policies in the private sector need to be encouraged, because they too support families in the appropriate mobilization of their stretched resources for family life.

Child support costs need to be divided reasonably between divorced or separated parents. Family policies must be designed to explore a more equitable split of the burden of children's financial support between mother and father. Such a policy cannot alone end the poverty of single parent families, but it can ease the burden on them and contribute to their financial stability.

Summary

Family life continues to change, and changes in American family life are closely tied to changes in women's lives. However, there is no indication that women themselves are giving up on families or, in fact, abdicating the responsibilities they have traditionally held. Rather women are struggling with increasing burdens as they assume increased fiscal and personal responsibilities in family life, while increasing their commitment to paid employment. We need to discover policies that strengthen them in their abilities and add to their resources.

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